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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000663

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STATE FOR EUR/NCE, NEA/ELA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/07/2017

TAGS: PREL LO SY

SUBJECT: SLOVAKIA: UPCOMING VISIT OF PRESIDENT GASPAROVIC
TO SYRIA

REF: VIKMANIS-KELLER-BALL EMAIL 12/10/07 BRATISLAVA 661

Classified By: Ambassador Vincent Obsitnik, for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (C) Summary. President Gasparovic and Defense Minister Kasicky will make a one-day visit to Syria on December 18 to meet with Slovak peacekeepers deployed to the UNDOF Mission in the Golan Heights. Gasparovic also will meet briefly with President Asad. In his first meeting with President Gasparovic, Ambassador Obsitnik encouraged him to deliver a firm message to the SARG on Lebanon, the peace process and human rights. Gasparovic appeared to be receptive to the Ambassador's request. Separately, DCM and PolEcon Chief discussed U.S. concerns about the peace process, Lebanon and the human rights situation in Syria with the President's Foreign Policy Advisor, Deputy FM Strofova and other MFA officials and urged them to ensure that President Gasparovic's talking points included these issues. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Following the presentation of credentials (ref b), Ambassador Obsitnik used the occasion of his first one-on-one meeting with President Gasparovic to deploy ref a points on Syria. The Ambassador encouraged Gasparovic to deliver a strong message to President Asad about the need to take a constructive approach towards the peace process and relations with other countries in the region, including Lebanon. Gasparovic said he agreed on the need to build on the recent Annapolis Conference and that he would raise this and other issues with Asad.

¶3. (C) On the margins of the credentialing ceremony, DCM stressed to Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Jan Foltin and Deputy Foreign Minister Diana Strofova our concern that Syria is not playing a constructive role in the process. DCM noted that human rights situation in Syria is dismal, with political detainees being held by the government and strong limits on freedom of travel. Foltin seemed surprised by the comments, noting that he thought that things had gotten better. When PolEcon chief raised the visit with Marian Tomasik, Director of the MFA Middle East Department, he expressed chagrin about the President's decision. He noted that the President's office was focused mainly on the trip's domestic angle, i.e., the need to demonstrate support for the troops. When the SARG made clear that it expected that Gasparovic would meet with Asad, there was little thought on the part of the President's office as to the potential ramifications and pitfalls of such a meeting. The visit was presented to the MFA as a fait accompli, Tomsasik said, and it was working now to make the best of the situation by

advising the President to deliver appropriate messages to Asad. On December 14, FM Kubis's Chef de Cabinet, Miro Jenca, called the DCM to ask what points we would like President Gasparovic to raise and pledged to do his best to ensure that they were made.

¶4. (C) Comment. We hope that the fact that the Ambassador raised our concerns will have at least some impact on Gasparovic's approach to Asad. To further emphasize our point, DCM cited our condemnation of the December 12 bombing in Beirut as reason for a strong message of non-interference in Lebanon's internal affairs. The MFA is fully aware of Syria's behavior and included a none-too-subtle reference to Syria in its own statement on the bombing and assassination of General al Hajj: "...the Slovak Foreign Minister calls on all Lebanese political parties as well as other interested parties in the region to cease any activity that could threaten the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon." End Comment.

OBSITNIK